

BEYOND THE BOUNDARY

Time for some ulcers

SHAKIL KASEM



Barring a few more matches, and a few probable hiccups along the way, the Circle of Circe is almost about to be completed. It is the time now for the real Power Play in this year's competition. Time now for even the unfit to survive, if the going goes right. Every match has now suddenly acquired an importance not just for the protagonists but also for those whose instincts for survival had somehow been diminished; partly because of factors they were unable to come to terms with or just because they had faltered when least expected.

As England take on the West Indies today, the survival instincts of the English must of necessity be razor sharp. The whining and winging wimps last seen in Chittagong really need to stand up and be counted at Chennai, failing which one more World Cup will have disparaging memories of a team which in spite of all things said to the contrary will continue to remain in wait of the Fat Lady. So far she has not only not sung for the English, she has not even bothered to turn up at all.

West Indies on the other hand have not much to lose as they are ahead marginally in the rat race. Courtesy of the demolition job done on Bangladesh, the Net Run Rate has been more than kind to the Windies. However, the gut feeling is that this team is not ready to curl up and die without a stirring riposte of some sort. The batting still has not lived up to its potential although some indications from Pollard and company do not bode well for a suspect English attack, exposed to the hilt as it was against the Tigers. In Suleiman Benn both the Windies and the rest of the world are in awe of yet another left arm spinner finding the job of earning wickets in the sub-continent still as easy as it had been made out to be.

Would the batting, with the inclusion of Eoin Morgan, be able to bear the brunt of some slippery pace in the form of Kemar Roach? Or would Graeme Swann be able to put his spinning fingers where his mouth is and pose some real challenges to the likes of Chris Gayle and his sunshine band? Or would the wicket at Chennai be the real fly on the wall putting all speculations to rest in the manner least expected? Whatever said and done, the considerably endangered Tigers will doubtless be waiting apprehensively, and for good measure having to put up with some inane Siddhuisms along the way, for that elusive ride up the escalator. Or as Salim Chowdhury offered quite profoundly, would they need to ride on the misery of others. Never were truer words spoken than in this context.

However, the mood in the Kasem household has been considerably upbeat as self and offspring rejoiced late in the night on an English victory, namely Manchester United getting past Marseille for a place in the Champions League quarters. England could take a bit of heart from this result perhaps, but the flip side remains the French do not play cricket. The circle therefore remains uncompleted. We will have to wait till the morrow brings whatever tidings may be of consequence. In the meantime let one and all grow a few more ulcers.

Shahzad ill too!

AFP, Chennai



Fast bowler Ajmal Shahzad became the latest England player to fall ill on the eve of their crucial World Cup clash against the West Indies. But the good news for England was that captain Andrew Strauss and key off-spinner Graeme Swann were both back in action after missing Tuesday's training session because of illness. "I am feeling very well, thank you for asking," Strauss said at the Chidambaram Stadium on Wednesday. "I was laid low the night before last and yesterday morning but I feel fine now. "Graeme Swann is recovering well and should be practising today. I don't know if he's quite as buoyant as I am but we are still pretty confident that he will be fine for tomorrow. "Ajmal Shahzad has been struck by it and won't practise today. I'm not sure whether it will affect his chances of being selected tomorrow."

England, who've suffered shock defeats by both Ireland and Bangladesh at this tournament, must beat the West Indies to have a shot at the quarterfinals, although they will still need other results to go their way.

Defeat would signal the end of the Ashes-holders and World Twenty20 champions' World Cup campaign.

KP's surgery ok

AFP, London



England star Kevin Pietersen has successfully undergone surgery on the hernia which cut short his World Cup campaign, the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) confirmed Wednesday. Pietersen, who was said to be "devastated" by his withdrawal from England's World Cup squad, will now focus on getting fit in time for the Test series against Sri Lanka starting on May 26.

"Kevin underwent a successful, routine operation with a hernia and an area of weaknesses repaired on the left side while a small hernia was identified and repaired on the right side," ECB chief medical officer Nick Peirce said.

"His return to first-class cricket will be determined once he commences his rehabilitation programme but we expect him to be fully fit in time for England's first summer Test starting May 26."

Pietersen had initially planned to play through the pain barrier during the World Cup but withdrew after informing management that his condition had worsened.

ENGLAND V WEST INDIES: CHENNAI

Nervous English Thursday



(L-R) West Indies players, led by captain Darren Sammy (R), warm up during practice, while England captain Andrew Strauss (L) and all-rounder Paul Collingwood (R) get ready for batting practice at the M.A Chidambaram Stadium in Chennai yesterday, ahead of today's World Cup match here.

PHOTOS: AFP

AFP, Chennai



England head into their final Group B match against the West Indies on Thursday knowing defeat will send them crashing out of the World Cup.

Even victory may not be enough for Andrew Strauss's men to go through to the knockout stages, with England having to rely on other results going their way.

England's preparations suffered a setback when skipper Strauss and lead spinner Graeme Swann both missed training Tuesday through illness while strike fast bowler James Anderson received treatment for a shoulder niggle.

"They're two key players and would be in anybody's team," England batsman Jonathan Trott said of Strauss and Swann.

A see-saw tournament for England has seen them lose to Ireland and Bangladesh yet tie with India and beat a highly-fancied South Africa.

Significantly, that win over the Proteas came at Chennai's Chidambaram Stadium where England held their nerve on a sharply

turning pitch to win a low-scoring thriller by six runs.

Now they hope Swann is fully fit to again put the squeeze on the batsmen in a match that is not quite as decisive for the West Indies, who return to the Chidambaram three days later for a group finale against India.

"It does give things a certain amount of clarity," said Swann, all but unplayable at times while taking one for 29 against South Africa.

"If we win four games, we win the World Cup which is very simple. If we'd won our first four games it would have been a much nicer position to be in but there's no point in looking back. It all comes down to Thursday."

Swann, who in his first over in Test cricket took two wickets against India in Chennai in 2008, added: "I hope the wicket is similar to the South African one. If I could roll it up and take it around with me, I happily would."

However, he warned: "The West Indies have got Suleiman Benn, who is a fine spin bowler."

Meanwhile Trott highlighted an inability to put together an all-round display as the reason behind England's roller coaster campaign.

"We haven't played consistently," he said. "We've either played badly with the bat and well with the ball or badly with the ball and well with the bat."

The West Indies have two big-hitting batsmen in opener Chris Gayle and the in-form Kieron Pollard who can change the momentum of a match in a short space of time.

Pollard hammered 94 off just 55 balls as the West Indies beat Ireland by 44 runs last time out and it was an innings the all-rounder hopes has rid him of the tag of being 'just' a Twenty20 cricketer.

"What's been said about me being a 20-over specialist, that's just history for me

now," Pollard, 23, said.

"I had an opportunity to prove myself and there cannot be a bigger stage than the World Cup to do that. My innings showed what I can do. I will use this as a positive."

He added: "After losing that first match against South Africa, we've really bounced back as a team."

"We have a lot of things that are driving us at the moment, one of the things being we were written off. We are using that as a motivating factor."

The good news for the West Indies is that either a win against England or India will see them into the quarterfinals and even two defeats may not be enough to end their World Cup.

ENGLAND V WEST INDIES

Matches: 84
England win: 37
West Indies win: 41
No result/Tied/Abandoned: 6
First meeting: Sept 5, 1973, Leeds -- England won by 1 wicket
Last meeting: May 26, 2009, Birmingham -- England won by

With or without Jimmy? Sammy banks on Gibson

AFP, Chennai



England were deciding whether to stick with misfiring strike bowler James Anderson as their World Cup date with destiny approached.

Andrew Strauss's Ashes-winners must beat the West Indies on Thursday to have a chance of reaching the quarterfinals, although they will still need other results to go their way.

Defeat would spell the end of a World Cup campaign that has already seen England suffer shock losses to both Ireland and Bangladesh.

One major problem for England has been the form of Ashes spearhead Anderson, whose four wickets have cost 282 runs at an average of more than 70 apiece.

His form has been made worse by the absence of fellow seamer Stuart Broad, who took four wickets in England's six-run win over South Africa, but has since been ruled out of the World Cup with a side strain.

"Jimmy has had a tough time in

some of the games in the World Cup so far but we all know what a qualify performer he is," said England captain Strauss, who returned to training on Wednesday after a bout of illness.

"He has done it for us over and over again during the course of the winter and previously. So his name is very much in the mix for selection."

Fast bowler Ajmal Shahzad became the latest player, after Strauss and off-spinner Graeme Swann, to succumb to illness on Thursday.

Opening batsman Strauss, asked if Shahzad's health would have a bearing on Anderson's selection now Chris Tremlett has replaced Broad, said: "No, not necessarily...It is something we have to think about."

Strauss said he hoped the make-or-break nature of Thursday's contest would see England raise their game.

"We have done well in big matches over the last couple of years. The equation is very simple and this isn't a time to go into our shells -- we have to get out there and take the West

Indies team on.

"We've lost two games we shouldn't have lost. We've put ourselves in this situation, which is disappointing. We're not going to hide away from that."

"But the equation is very clear. We have to win this game. There's no reason for us to doubt ourselves. We should go out and play good, aggressive, attacking cricket and hope that is enough to send us through."

Strauss maintained England could yet go on to win what would be a first World Cup title.

"Once every team gets into the last eight, then every game is a must-win game. I have every confidence we will be able to do that."

Strauss dismissed the effects of fatigue on a squad which has been on the road virtually non-stop for almost five months.

"One thing I would say is that fatigue is the last thing on our minds," Strauss insisted.

"We know what the prize is and we are determined to make the most of our opportunity to take that prize."

AFP, Chennai



West Indies captain Darren Sammy hopes to make the most of coach Otis Gibson's knowledge of England when the sides meet in a key World Cup clash on Thursday.

Victory for the West Indies in the Group B match will see them into the quarterfinals while England must win to keep alive their hopes of reaching the last eight and then hope other results fall kindly for them.

Former West Indies fast bowler Gibson spent more than two years as England's bowling coach before taking charge of the West Indies in January 2010.

"The plus we have is we have a coach who just a year ago was working with England, so he has inside details and will be quite helpful," Sammy said on Wednesday.

"He has a lot of information and has worked in a successful English team."

"Obviously we've been analysing the opposition. We'll be looking to go out and exploit the weaknesses tomorrow."

Sammy said now was a good time to be playing an England side who have suffered shock defeats by Ireland and Bangladesh at this World Cup.

The bulk of Andrew Strauss's side have been on tour since October, winning the Ashes Test series but losing the subsequent one-day campaign against Australia 6-1.

"It's a good time to play England," all-rounder Sammy said. "Obviously, they've been on the road for a long time. Apparently, they've been home for four days in five months."

"That's something that will be on their minds. In order for them to stay, they've got to win... or maybe some of them will want to go home to their families. You never know."

West Indies have been bolstered for this match by the return of dynamic opening batsman Chris Gayle, who missed their 44-run win against Ireland last time out with an abdominal strain.

"It's great to have him back. Chris is a massive boost for us. He is obviously a key member of our team," Sammy said.

England's last group match at Chennai saw them beat South Africa, one of the tournament favourites, by six runs in a low-scoring thriller.

That encounter saw England off-spinner Graeme Swann play a key role on a spin-friendly Chidambaram Stadium pitch.

However, it was fast bowler Stuart Broad, since ruled out of the World Cup with a side strain, who did the bulk of the damage with four wickets.

Swann missed England training on Tuesday with illness while Broad's absence has been compounded for England by senior strike bowler James Anderson's poor form at the World Cup.

"Jimmy's done well for England, and had a good Ashes campaign," Sammy said. "His lack of form is a worry for Strauss and England."

"We have great respect for him. Not having him, one of their leading bowlers, would be a plus [for us]."

Sammy also said his team rated Swann highly but added: "He is still human, and we have batsmen capable of dominating."

West Indies, world champions in 1975 and 1979, have won three successive matches since losing their tournament opener to South Africa.

"We came here as underdogs, but we all know as a team what we're capable of doing," said Sammy.



England players (from L) Chris Tremlett, James Tredwell and James Anderson wait their turn during practice at the M.A Chidambaram Stadium in Chennai yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP